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Kairotic Moments in the Writing Center

Fall 2009 / Focus

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Making the most of proper timing in a consultation

Situating Kairos—Tim Taylor

Those of us who work in writing centers mark our time. We schedule in 30-minute, 40-minute, 45-minute, and hour increments, and we confer, collaborate, and work in those temporal spaces. That type of time represents the linear quality of how long a session runs, when a writing center pedagogy class begins and ends, the temporal arc of a semester—what the ancient Greeks called *chronos*.

But the time tutors [1] spend in conferences and the time directors devote to training and supervising writing consultants is marked by opportune moments that are varied, complex, and diverse. There are myriad spaces for crucial decision-making within the time constraints of writing conferences and directorships. They mark and drive our work. This article will explore the ways a different conception of time—what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*—should inform and improve our work in writing centers since “*kairos* points to a *qualitative* character of time, the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens *that* cannot happen just at ‘any time,’ but only at that time, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur” (Smith 47). As James Kinneavy relates in his landmark essay about the concept, *kairos* “might be defined as the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something” (58). So, at the basic level, *kairos* is “an embodiment of *carpe diem* ... with a decidedly individualistic motif” (Hawhee 20). This complementary and, we argue, much more important concept of time emphasizes the individuality of each rhetorical situation or occasion (*kairon*). In ancient Greece and Rome, when rhetors attempted to persuade in the assembly or the courts, they had to invent and arrange their argumentative strategies “on the spot,” and, likewise, tutors make judgments on the spot (Kinneavy 67). Among many decisions, tutors decide when to be direct, when to be indirect, when to ask a question, when to move to another part of the paper, when to address mechanical or citation issues, and when and how to conclude a session.

Because writing consultants work with diverse individuals on diverse projects, it is crucial that directors and consultants break free from a mindset of how sessions are supposed to proceed and embrace the Isocratic ideals of *phronesis* and *kairos* [...].

The demands of *chronos* bind us, however. We only have so much time with writers who visit our centers, and as directors we only have so much time to

observe consulting sessions and help tutors develop as professionals. Similar to Anne Ellen Geller who calls for writing center directors and consultants to think more reflectively about what she terms as “epochal time,” we also argue that we should shift our “concerns from the unyielding demands of clock time to the fluidity and possibility of epochal time,” an argument that connects to the ancient idea of *kairos*—right timing, propriety, decorum, due measure, wise moderation, the opportune moment (8). Likewise, Debra Hawhee, in “Kairotic Encounters,” offers the idea that *kairos* is connected to invention in the classical canon, so she terms it as “invention-in-the-middle” (17). This conceptualization of *kairos* aligns with the idea of students coming to writing centers as they are in the middle of their thoughts—they are inventing themselves as writers and inventing their papers. Writing centers, based on such ideals, are sites for inventing-in-the-middle. And, as described by Muriel Harris, a writing center is emblematic of “a middle person” (27), an intermediary who has practical wisdom (what the Greeks called *phronesis*) since “practical knowing—the knowledge of the practitioner—arises out of the individual’s recognition of a set of possibilities for actions, internalized images, descriptions, and prescriptions” (32-33). Tutors recognize possibilities and think about when to intervene, when to sit back, when to be direct in their questions, when to embrace silence to make writers think, when to explain the moves of academic discourse, and when to focus on helping a student learn to edit and proofread more effectively.

We agree with Carl Glover that writing consultants need to have a “*kairos*-consciousness’: a readiness to respond appropriately to the opportunities created in the tutor-client relationship” (15). And this *kairos*-consciousness needs to be developed in tutor training courses and on-going professional development opportunities. Because writing consultants work with diverse individuals on diverse projects, it is crucial that directors and consultants break free from a mindset of how sessions are supposed to proceed and embrace the Isocratic ideals of *phronesis* and *kairos* that help speakers focus on “what is practical and expedient under *any* given set of circumstances—the principle of *kairos*” (Sipiora 9). Since tutors’ audiences are directly in front of them and conferences obviously involve spoken communication, the original subject of classical rhetoric, conferences require consultants to adapt and improvise as the writing situation, the writer’s ideas, and the writer’s reactions dictate. So, rather than having an ideal of how sessions progress, successful writing consultants play and experiment with the ideas, the tangents, the hiccups, the starts and stops, and the multiple ways sessions run like their writers—as *individuals*. Those who study and practice writing center pedagogy, like students of Isocrates, need to have “an intense awareness of occasion, audience, and situational context. Such is a life based on *kairos*” (Sipiora 15).

The sections that follow examine professional lives based on *kairotic* thinking—the work of writing consultants and writing center directors. The stories and reflections showcase how we have developed a strong *kairos*-consciousness in our work, and, as I relate in the conclusion, how *kairos* can work as an essential guiding principle for promoting strong professional development. In “If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center...,” Melissa Ianetta challenges us to use classical rhetoric as “a useful analytical framework” (38) for our work, and she also describes her essay “as an invitation to the possibilities offered to both disciplines when the history of rhetoric is read alongside writing center studies” (39). The writing center consultants who have separate sections in this article—Klein, McDuffie, Black, and Heath—had that opportunity during graduate school since they took my History of Rhetoric graduate seminar alongside our writing

center practicum. As they read Gorgias, Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, they made connections between ancient rhetoric and the writing center, especially how *kairos* informs the work they do. Their sections offer reflections on *kairotic* moments they experienced as consultants in the writing center while Kory and I offer our own perspectives on *kairos* and *kairotic* moments as directors of this writing center. The ancient rhetorical concept fosters a strong intellectual investment in the work we do in the writing center, and we argue that *kairos* is a crucial tool for fostering important reflective practice for both writing consultants and writing directors.

[To continue reading "Kairotic Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below]

The Write Time–Nia Klein

The Most Vital *Kairotic* Moment–Kristi McDuffie

Nurturing *Kairos*-Consciousness–Fern Kory

Right Place, Wrong Timing–Devin Black

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

Note

[1] In this article we use the terms consultant and tutor interchangeably.

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Nia Klein is a second year graduate student in English at **Eastern Illinois University**, concentrating in Composition and Rhetoric. She has a particular interest in writing as healing. Nia has been a writing consultant in the writing center at Eastern Illinois University for two semesters, and she also works as a teaching assistant in first-year composition at **Parkland College** in Champaign, Illinois.



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Fern Kory is a professor of English at **Eastern Illinois University** whose interest in composition pedagogy was sparked early in her graduate work at **University of California, Santa Barbara**, where she was mentored as a teacher of composition by Sheridan Blau, and where she participated in the **South Coast Writing Project** Summer Open Program. For more than ten years, she has been Assistant Director of the EIU **Writing Center** (founded in 1981 by Jeanne Simpson), and during that time she has worked alongside four (very) different directors. She values the truly collaborative nature of writing center work and the opportunity to work with our graduate assistant tutors, who bring fresh energy and insight to the writing center each year. Regional, National and **International Writing Center Association** conferences (most recently the **ECWCA** conference at Purdue) have also been a source of inspiration and growth.



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